TSIATSA - searching for connection, (detail) 2013.
Aluminium (bottle-tops, printing plates, roofing sheets) and copper wire, 15.6 x 25 m.
Photo: Jonathan Greet
Aluminium (bottle-tops, printing plates, roofing sheets) and copper wire,
15.6 x 25 m. on the facade of the Royal Academy of Arts.
Photo: Jonathan Greet
ARCHITECT OF EVANESCENT ILLUSIONS... smaller to larger...

Although the claim has often been made before, TSIATSIA – searching for connection (2013) is the largest hanging aluminium bottle-top sculpture that El Anatsui has ever created. The same was, of necessity, true of Woman’s Cloth (2002), the original work of art that began this remarkable series, measuring around ninety square feet in size. It was likewise true of Man’s Cloth (2002), the second in the series, nearly a quarter as large again. From that initial point onwards the works have continued to grow in size as much as they have in value. This most recent addition to the lineage of aluminium and copper wire sculptures, comprising eight panels, each of 500 square feet in size and all connected together, was custom-built to ornament the imposing façade of Burlington House during the 245th Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy (2013). El Anatsui’s hanging sculptures are modular by design. Many individual ‘blocks’ were connected together to create that original cloth. Beyond a certain scale, individual ‘cloths’ could be ‘stitched’ together to form larger assemblies, and so on up to the ‘panel’ scale, a size permitting ease of transport. Multiple panels when connected together create sumptuous singularities, such as TSIATSIA – searching for connection, of over 4000 square feet. The process is simple. The upper limits of the scale, to date, remain unknown.

The Ewe and English title, TSIATSIA – searching for connection, employs the verb ‘tsia’ meaning ‘to connect.’ ‘Tsiatsia’ - a noun form of that verb - adds a further layer of complexity, implying an ongoing process of looking to make connections, of laying down pathways – in spatial or neurological terms - that develop habitual patterns of access the more frequently they’re used. This root idea of ‘pathways’ was simultaneously

EARTH-MOON CONNEXIONS, 1995. Tropical hard woods and tempera, 90 x 84.4 x 2.5 cm. Collection of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., USA Purchased with funds provided by the Smithsonian Acquisition Program, 96-17-1 Photo: Franko Khoury
present during the many months of gestation required to bring this piece into existence. It is appropriate that in a work comprising more than a quarter of a million bottle-tops, each connected, minimally, to four of its neighbours, all painstakingly ‘stitched’ by many hands into a unified whole, the idea of connectivity should be foregrounded at this the most basic level of structure.

At the integrative level of design, the work of art suggests two contrasting bodies separated by a sinuous, intervening, silvery space, across which division coloured elements almost connect, to suggest evolving pathways of communication. Seen from orbit it might represent a strategic map of naval manoeuvres: at the nanolevel of spatial resolution, we could imagine an electron microscopic image of chemical messengers moving across the synaptic pathway within the living cell. Of further interest in this formal sense are several earlier wooden wall-hanging sculptures by El Anatsui where similar sorts of patterns and ideas were explored. One such, Earth-Moon Connexions (1993), shows two forms of different sizes representing the Earth and its companion Moon, separated by intervening space, across which colourful strands (gravitational forces?) appear to connect, fixing the opposing bodies in a defined relationship.

Most frequently, however, El Anatsui wants his often poetic titles simply to indicate an overall direction without insisting on too literal an interpretation in any formal or figurative sense. Once any fears of failing to understand ‘the meaning of the work’ have been calmed, the viewers are free to observe it for themselves, developing whatever individual trains of thought are prompted by the piece. At these scales, such imposing structures, that move and change with the shifting lights of day and the varieties of weather are meant to be experienced at least as much as they are supposed to be understood. We can be captivated, held spellbound or bedazzled by this gleaming fabric under conditions of full sunlight; or calmed, perhaps strangely stirred, by the chance interventions of overhanging clouds, a squall of rain or gust of wind. Experientially, in this place and at that moment in time, this too becomes part of the meaning of the work. We connect to the shimmering form of a myriad meanings overwhelming us with experiences sensed in the continuous present.
earlier to later...

The connection between El Anatsui and the October Gallery began over 20 years ago with a felicitous moment of pure serendipity. Because of its broad remit to exhibit the work of cutting edge contemporary artists from around the planet, Elisabeth Lalouschek, the gallery’s Artistic Director, was shown a documentary film about contemporary art in Africa produced by Smithsonian World, USA.

“Suddenly, I saw an artist’s chainsaw tearing powerfully through tropical hardwoods. The sound of the chainsaw was deafening; the wood was black from burning; and I knew that I was witnessing the creation of an artistic masterpiece. This artist had to be found, and I immediately set about searching for works by El Anatsui. Then, one day, Sandor Péri, a Hungarian architect telephoned me. He had several works, ranging from an early wooden plaque, through wooden wall reliefs to a free-standing sculpture. Péri had been one of the architects who had planned the new University of Nigeria at Nsukka. He built the Physical Sciences block, in 1982, for which he’d commissioned two public sculptures by El Anatsui, who had started teaching at the university some years earlier.”

With this significant lead established, the collaborative links grew stronger and El Anatsui’s work was first shown at October Gallery, in November 1993, in a group exhibition. This was followed, in 1995, by his first solo exhibition in the U.K., El Anatsui: Reliefs and Sculptures, comprising eighteen wooden wall-hanging sculptures surrounding a large central tree-trunk, ruthlessly carved with a chainsaw, its compromised outer surfaces still richly ornamented by the persisting traces of African symbols and scripts (Erosion, 1992). Debris lay strewn around the standing tree-trunk’s base.

Though born and educated in Ghana, where he studied Art at the University in Kumasi, El Anatsui has lived and worked in Nigeria since 1975. There, as Professor of Sculpture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka until his retirement in 2011, he exerted a powerful influence on successive generations of younger artists. Many of his students have themselves gone on to become leading artists, art historians and critical theorists in their own right. Over the intervening decades he has maintained an increasingly active schedule of engagements around the world, becoming one of the most influential and exciting contemporary artists on the international stage. During this time, he has explored an unusually wide range of media: from concrete, ceramics, tropical hardwoods, driftwood and discarded wooden mortars in the latter decades of the 20th century, to found and re-purposed metals, including roofing materials, cassava graters, milk-tin lids, printing plates and aluminium bottle-tops in his more recent installations. Indeed, the decades on either side of the millennial divide could be characterised as two distinct periods. The first is a period of explorations in wood (incisively sawn and gouged; elaborately scorched and painted), many of the source materials for which, as in the house-posts and mortar series, were discarded objects recovered from the local environment. The second period is distinguished by a flourishing range of installations using found objects made of more...
Opposite page: BALKAN (detail), 2012.
Aluminium and copper wire, 260 x 320 cm.

Photos: Jonathan Greet